

PRESIDENT JONATHAN NEZ  
VICE PRESIDENT MYRON LIZER



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Presented to the  
24<sup>TH</sup> NAVAJO NATION  
COUNCIL

# STATE OF THE NAVAJO NATION ADDRESS

# President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer

Yáát'ééh to the honorable members of the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council, Speaker Seth Damon, Chief Justice JoAnn B. Jayne, as well as chapter, county, state, and federal leaders, and most importantly our Diné Citizens. On behalf of the Nez-Lizer Administration, we are pleased to present to you the State of the Navajo Nation Address for the 2021 Spring Council Session.

Before we begin, we want to take a moment to honor and remember our brother, our colleague, and our honorable leader, Nelson S. BeGaye. Over the years, we all looked up to him for his wisdom and guidance on many issues. He always greeted everyone with a handshake, a warm smile, and his great sense of humor. The Navajo people and all of us as leaders today were blessed to have such a great person and great leader serve alongside us for many years. We offer our condolences and our prayers for his wife, Linda, his children and grandchildren, his community, and to all of the members of the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council.

In early February, we also lost our brother and former Navajo Nation President Albert Hale. Many of us knew him as "Ahbihay." He always greeted us all with a big hug and a big smile on his face. Throughout his lifetime, he demonstrated his love and compassion for our people through his service and all of his great contributions as President of the Navajo Nation and as a member of the Arizona Senate and House of Representatives. We honor and remember him and we continue to pray for his wife, children, and everyone who had the honor of knowing him.

We thank the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council for your leadership and support since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Last month on March 17<sup>th</sup>, the Navajo Nation marked one year since the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was reported. We held a candlelit vigil and a Day of Prayer in honor and memory of all of the lives lost to this invisible monster that continues to impact the lives of our people. COVID-19 continues to present unprecedented challenges for all of us, especially for our frontline warriors who continue to fight for our people each and every day.

On March 30<sup>th</sup>, we announced the first confirmed case of the B.1.1.7 variant, also known as the U.K. variant, which was identified in the western portion of our Nation. One week later, the B.1.429 variant known as the California variant was identified in the Chinle Service Unit, and most recently, in the Gallup Service Unit and Shiprock Service Unit. Despite these new challenges, our Navajo people have managed to keep our numbers of new COVID-19 infections relatively low.

This is in large part due to the commitment of our health care workers who have worked non-stop to administer the COVID-19 vaccines since December. As of today, the Navajo Area Indian Health Service reports that 246,465 vaccine doses have been received, and 214,309 of those doses have been administered, representing 87%. 93,813 of our people have been fully vaccinated.



On April 13<sup>th</sup>, IHS and our tribal health facilities paused the use of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine here on the Navajo Nation, based on recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration. The CDC and FDA recommended a pause in the use of the vaccine based on six reported U.S. cases, out of 6.8 million doses administered nationally, of a rare and severe type of blood clot in individuals after receiving the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

Navajo Area IHS informed us that approximately 4,000 doses of the Johnson & Johnson had been administered on the Navajo Nation prior to the announcement from the CDC and FDA on April 13<sup>th</sup>, and there have been no major side effects reported. We continue to work closely with the Navajo Department of Health, Navajo Area IHS, and tribal health facilities to monitor the status of those who received this particular vaccine. Our health care experts indicate the Johnson & Johnson matter does not impact the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines.

Recently, Pfizer requested FDA approval to begin vaccinating individuals who are 12 to 15 years in age. If the Pfizer vaccine is proven to be safe for younger people, we believe this will help to bring our students back to the classrooms when the time is right. Our administration continues to support online learning for all of our students on the Navajo Nation. We are aware that some schools have moved toward in-person learning, despite our position and the resolution from the Navajo Nation Council that remains in effect supporting online learning. We continue to work with the Navajo Department of Health, Department of Diné Education, and others to address these issues on a case-by-case basis.

Before we address the American Rescue Plan Act, we also want to address the vacancy of the position of the Director of Indian Health Service, under the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. We thank Acting Director Elizabeth Fowler for her service as she continues to oversee IHS until a Director is appointed. We have recommended that current Navajo Area IHS Director Roselyn Tso be considered to lead the entire Indian Health Service based on her many years of experience working with IHS and the service and commitment that she has displayed during her time as the Navajo Area IHS Director. Director Tso's service with the Indian Health Service dates back to 1987. Over the years, she has worked in several different capacities with several different regions under Indian Health Service. Her vast knowledge, experience, and dedication make her a great candidate to oversee the Indian Health Service and work in partnership with Tribal Nations.

As we move forward in this fight against COVID-19, our administration continues to work closely with the White House, the Biden-Harris cabinet members including U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland and U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, federal agencies, Congressional members, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and many others to implement the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act to help recover from the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Act provides \$20 billion for tribes – \$1 billion is to be allocated equally among the 574 federally recognized tribes while the U.S. Department of the Treasury will decide how the remaining funds will be distributed to tribes.

In early March, our administration recommended a funding formula based on four factors that include population, land base, number of employees, and direct COVID-19 impacts measured by coronavirus infections, deaths, and other key factors. Our Nation was hit especially hard by the virus and that should be a deciding factor in how the funds are distributed to tribes.

We thank the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council and Speaker Damon for holding work sessions to discuss several of the priorities that we discussed during the Three Branch Chiefs meeting on March 29<sup>th</sup>. As we stated during that meeting, the general strategy for the American Rescue Plan funds should be to maximize and leverage funding each of the funding opportunities, not only from the \$20 billion, but also from the other pots of funding that will become available.

We have been engaged in many tribal consultation sessions with various federal agencies, regarding the American Rescue Plan in the last several weeks and we have also made it clear to the federal government that the funds should be distributed in the form of direct funding to tribes, and not in the form of grants that may require additional documentation and applications.



In addition to the \$20 billion for tribal nations, the American Rescue Plan also provides approximately \$6 billion for Indian Health Service, \$1.2 billion for HUD tribal and Native Hawaiian housing programs, \$1.1 billion for educational programs including the Bureau of Indian Education, over \$1 billion for tribal child care programs and \$75 million for tribal TANF, \$900 million for Bureau of Indian Affairs programs, \$600 million for economic and infrastructure investments, \$20 million to mitigate the impact of on Native languages, and \$19 million to help combat domestic violence.

We will continue to work together with the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council, Judicial Branch, and many others to put forth a collaborative plan that includes the general priorities related to direct relief, infrastructure development, economic recovery, housing, long-term planning, mental health, and more.

On March 31<sup>st</sup>, the Biden-Harris Administration presented a \$2 trillion jobs and infrastructure plan, also known as the American Jobs Plan, that proposes large investments for transportation infrastructure, clean drinking water, high-speed broadband, electrical infrastructure, affordable and sustainable housing, clean energy development, home and community-based care for elderly and disabled, manufacturing and small business, research and development, workforce development, and educational initiatives. Our administration, through the Navajo Nation Washington Office, continues efforts to coordinate and advocate for additional support through the American Jobs Plan for the Navajo Nation.

On April 13<sup>th</sup>, our administration met with U.S. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg and U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for Tribal Affairs Arlando Teller, to discuss our administration's transportation white paper titled, "Diné Atiin Bahane: Navajo Road Emergence," which requests the federal government to enact seven specific policy changes to improve the Navajo Nation's transportation system. The document also outlines specific challenges and successes related to transportation projects and initiatives in support of the recommended policy changes.

The white paper puts forth seven requests for federal agencies, the White House, and other federal government offices that include the following:

- Resolve conflicts in agency authority and jurisdictions in order to protect our people, the environment, and indigenous cultural resources.
- Harmonize agency guidance with federal law to make Diné roads safe.
- Provide flexibility to the Tribal Priority Allocations (TPA) that the BIA uses for road maintenance so that TPA funds may also be used to fund tribal roads.
- Ensure agency practices are consistent with policies to make the Navajo road system equitable.
- Protect the integrity of tribal roads funds so that they do not subsidize non-tribal roads.
- Recognize that tribal bridges and roads present different exigencies of circumstance that require complimentary, not competitive funding sources.
- Promote tribal sovereignty by retroceding Secretarial approval over tribes who have demonstrated their own capacity for federal regulatory compliance.

Our position is that the Navajo Nation has built up our capacity with the establishment of the Navajo Nation EPA and Division of Transportation over the years, and we have many well-educated experts with vast experience that are capable of administering much of the oversight and regulatory authority that the federal agencies currently control. Our experts know what the issues are and they have solutions, but we need changes at the federal level to improve the processes that will deliver a safer and more efficient transportation system that supports economic opportunities, emergency response services, access to education, and enhance the Navajo Nation's overall ability to be more self-sufficient in the long-term.

Despite these challenges, we also want to highlight some of the recent accomplishments of the Navajo Division of

Transportation (NDOT) under Executive Director Garret Silversmith. In early March, NDOT and Navajo Engineering and Construction Authority (NECA) completed the final inspection of Navajo Route 27, which marks the completion of over 10 miles of new pavement between the communities of Nazlini and Chinle. This long-awaited road project is now completed and provides many benefits for local families, businesses, and others.

In early February, we signed a construction contract with NECA, for the first phase of the N11 Road Improvement Project in Mariano Lake, N.M. under the Navajo Nation Division of Transportation. The initial phase of construction will pave approximately 3.7 miles of the 12-mile road to help address safety concerns and improve access for school, work, commerce, health, and emergency response. We thank Honorable Edmund Yazzie and his local leaders for advocating for this road improvement project.

NDOT and NECA continue to make progress with the re-construction and expansion of Navajo Route 12 in Tsaile/Wheatfields. Once completed, the \$31 million project will expand the roadway to create shoulder lanes and graveling on both sides of a 10-mile stretch of N12 beginning north of Wheatfields Lake to the Tsaile intersection. This will allow commuters more room to maneuver in case of emergencies or to avoid collisions with livestock and other wildlife that are common on N12.

The late Honorable Nelson BeGaye played a vital role in the N12 project and sadly, he passed on before the project is completed, but we will remember him and always appreciate his leadership in this initiative. Our administration, through the Navajo Division of Transportation will continue to support the project for the benefit of residents and Diné College students, educators, and administrators who rely on this roadway on a daily basis.

When it comes to housing on the Navajo Nation, over the last several months, Navajo Veterans Administration Executive Director James D. Zwierlein worked with Navajo veterans' organizations and others to put together a legislation that sought to amend the Veterans Housing Program policy to establish a housing manufacturing facility to construct homes for our Navajo people. Unfortunately, amendments were made to this legislation as it moved through two Standing Committees, which ultimately halted progress of the housing program when the bill was approved.

We, along with several Navajo veterans' organizations, are requesting that new legislation be introduced to rescind the resolution that was passed on April 7th by the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee. Without this, the housing program will continue to be stalled. We respectfully request your support of this issue.

The COVID-19 pandemic magnified the need for more homes for Navajo families. On March 25<sup>th</sup>, we were notified that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development will provide \$50 million through the American Rescue Plan Act to the Navajo Nation, to help carry out affordable housing activities.

We are all aware of the living conditions for many Navajo families. We have multiple generational families living under one roof, which is beneficial for the purpose of passing along our teachings from one generation to the next, but it has also increased the number of COVID-19 infections among our people. With the incoming HUD funds, we are committed to developing more housing to help reduce the risks of COVID-19 in the coming years.

We know the longstanding challenges associated with the Navajo Housing Authority and we have to do better. We have to work together with NHA and our federal partners to create solutions to construct more homes for our Navajo people. We thank the members of the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council for holding a work session recently with NHA and we remain committed to working with you on these issues as we move forward.

Another key issue when we discuss the proposed \$2 trillion American Jobs Plan is renewable energy development. We have

to be prepared and ready with our plans to develop more renewable energy projects on the Navajo Nation when Congress considers the plan. In the last few weeks, the Navajo Nation, working with NTUA, has taken several steps forward with new emissions-free solar energy projects in the communities of Cameron and Red Mesa, Arizona.

With support of the Resources and Development Committee and NTUA, we recently finalized the leases for the Red Mesa Tapaha Solar Generation Plant and the Cameron Solar Generation Plant, which will produce 70-megawatts and 200 megawatts respectively, of emissions-free solar energy once construction is completed.

When we took office over two years ago, we signed the Hayookkaal proclamation to pursue and prioritize clean renewable energy development for the long-term benefit of the Navajo people. The signing of the leases for these two solar projects are a part of that vision. We thank the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council, NTUA, Cameron Chapter, Red Mesa Chapter, grazing permit holders, and many others involved in these initiatives.

Broadband expansion is another very critical infrastructure priority for the Navajo Nation. In February, we announced that the Navajo Nation successfully secured \$53 million in funding through the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) E-Rate Program, to install over 600 miles of fiber optic lines that will expand internet capacity for 90 chapter houses and 53 Head Start facilities on the Navajo Nation.

This historic achievement took years of coordination and planning as our administration works toward expanding and increasing internet capability and capacity within our communities. Through the coordination and persistence of many partners, we resolved longstanding issues that stemmed from previous administrations that stood in the way of progress. Now, many of our chapter houses and Head Start facilities will receive fiber optic lines that will provide enhanced internet service for officials and local residents who visit the chapter houses. Students and others will soon be able to use the internet service for school work and other tasks. We are very thankful to everyone who worked together to advance this monumental task.

Our administration continues to coordinate with the FCC and state officials to secure additional funds through the E-Rate Program to increase internet capabilities for schools and libraries on the Navajo Nation. A second application for funding was submitted recently to connect the remaining chapter houses and Head Start facilities that were not awarded in last year's application.

Through Navajo Nation Telecommunications Regulatory Commission Office Executive Director Christopher Becenti and the Commission members, we continue to work with the FCC to implement the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program, which was funded through a \$3.2 billion appropriation included in the Consolidated Appropriations Act. This program will provide eligible households with discounts of up to \$50 a month for broadband service, and up to \$75 a month if the household is on tribal lands. It also will provide a one-time discount of up to \$100 on a computer or tablet for eligible households.

On February 12<sup>th</sup>, our administration participated in a roundtable discussion hosted by the FCC, to gather input and recommendations to help with the establishment of the program. We spoke about the vast needs for telecommunications improvements to provide broadband services for families, students, tele-medicine, first responders, and many others.

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the need for broadband connectivity to meet the needs of our students, teachers, first responders, elders, and others. Through CARES Act funding, the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority completed 139 broadband installations and capacity upgrades to existing broadband equipment and constructed four new broadband/cell phone towers. Our administration will continue to build off of these recent successes to provide more broadband coverage and support with the American Rescue Plan Act and American Jobs Plan proposal.

Regarding recent accomplishments for the 110 chapters, last month, Navajo Nation Division of Community Development Executive Director Dr. Pearl Yellowman working with the Office of the Controller, OMB, Risk Management, and others, began delivering new heavy equipment to numerous chapters across the Navajo Nation. We take this opportunity to thank the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council for your support in approving \$24 million in January for this initiative to help empower chapters to meet the immediate needs in our communities.

With the purchase of the new equipment including graders, backhoes, utility vehicles, flatbeds, and more, also comes more responsibility for Chapters to maintain and care for the equipment and to ensure that elders, disabled, and those in great need benefit. According to the Division of Community Development, close to 200 pieces of heavy equipment have been delivered to chapters so far and more will be delivered in the coming days and weeks.

Working together with the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council, we were successful in securing approximately \$14.9 million in Capital Outlay Funds for Navajo chapters located in the State of New Mexico, with the recent signing of House Bill 285 by New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham.

On behalf of the Navajo Nation, we thank Governor Lujan Grisham, State Legislators, the Navajo Nation Division of Community Development, and many others who supported these much-needed projects and initiatives for our Navajo communities. We also thank the members of the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council and all of the chapter officials for their advocacy and support during the recent state legislative session.

Lastly, regarding support for chapters, we take this opportunity to thank the Council for supporting the \$4 million allocation for summer youth employment for the 110 chapters to help our students with expenses related to their education and other goals. We look forward to seeing our young people give back to their communities while earning funds to assist them financially this summer.

As we look forward to the next few months, we want to touch on a few additional issues and priorities that are currently in progress that our administration is focusing on.

On April 7<sup>th</sup>, we met with U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland and tribal leaders to call for the full restoration and expansion of the Bears Ears National Monument to 1.9 million acres.

It was truly a historic moment to have a Native American woman, serving in such a high position, at the head of the table discussing these important issues with leaders that represent the First People of this country. Her willingness to meet personally on this issue is meaningful and shows that she is willing to take time to meet with tribal leaders as well as other stakeholders in the Bears Ears region before providing her recommendation to President Biden. Our administration will continue to advocate for the full restoration and expansion of the Bears Ears National Monument.

On March 24<sup>th</sup>, we provided testimony before the U.S. Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties, in support of Navajo people who continue to experience long-term health impacts due to radioactive contamination and exposure from abandoned uranium mines, during a hearing titled, "Examining the Need to Expand Eligibility Under the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act."

Working with the Navajo Uranium Radiation Victims Committee, we called for Congress to extend the Radiation and Exposure Compensation Program beyond 2022, to include all downwinders, to expand coverage to include post-1971 workers and families, to expand eligibility for coverage under the program to include additional categories of workers and types of cancers, and to increase the compensation cap to a minimum of \$200,000 per individual.

Although there is approximately \$1.7 billion to clean-up the 219 mine sites, it is not enough. The Navajo Nation estimates that it will cost an additional \$3.5 billion to address the remaining 305 sites, which does not include the cost of long-term monitoring and maintenance. Our administration will continue to work with the stakeholders and the Council on this issue.

On April 12<sup>th</sup>, our administration submitted comments regarding the draft Environmental Impact Statement prepared by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which proposes to amend a source material license held by the United Nuclear Corporation (UNC). The proposed license amendment would allow UNC to transfer the uranium mine waste currently at the Northeast Church Rock (NECR) abandoned uranium mine on the Navajo Nation and dispose of it on top of the neighboring uranium mill tailings impoundment at the UNC Church Rock Mill Site, located in an area surrounded by Navajo trust lands. We strongly oppose this.

The Navajo Nation remains steadfast in our position that all NECR radioactive mine waste registering above the U.S. EPA's action level should be removed entirely from the community. Simply transporting it to a facility less than one mile away from our Nation is insufficient. We have to hold the federal government accountable and uphold the Diné Natural Resources Protection Act, which prohibits and transportation of uranium waste on our lands. We will continue to advocate this position for the health and wellness of our Navajo people.

On April 7<sup>th</sup>, we had the opportunity to meet with a few Westwater Subdivision residents near Blanding, Utah. For far too long, the 27 Navajo families in this area have lived without running water and electricity. During the recent Utah State Legislative session, the Navajo Nation successfully secured \$500,000 in the state's budget to help with infrastructure development for the Westwater Subdivision. Our administration will continue to meet with the community members and NTUA to assess the needs and incorporate water and electricity into the American Rescue Plan Act priorities. We ask the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council for your support in funding these infrastructure needs for the 27 families that reside in this community.

In 2019, our administration put forth legislation that proposed to set-aside \$50 million from the Síhasin Fund to establish an endowment to create more scholarship opportunities for Navajo students. Unfortunately, the legislation never received a final vote from the Council. The late Chief Manuelito once said, "We have to fight injustices of our people with education," and "education is a ladder" for our Navajo people. Setting aside funds for the education and future of our young Navajo people is the greatest investment we can make to help our children, grandchildren, and generations to come. We ask the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council to revisit this proposal to create path for education for more of our people.

As we move forward into the FY 2022 Comprehensive Budget hearings and sessions, we want to thank Chairman Jamie Henio for sponsoring legislation to approve the Permanent Trust Fund Five-Year Plan to ensure that we are able to meet the governmental services, including direct services to the Navajo people, for the next five years in the annual budgets. We respectfully ask the members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council to support this important legislation as it moves forward.

As we move forward, our administration remains focused on addressing and mitigating the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. We continue to urge our Navajo people to take all precautions, including wearing face masks, to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and the variants. Vaccinations are key to pushing back on this invisible monster.

We also take this opportunity to once again thank all of the frontline warriors, health care workers, Navajo Police Department, Navajo Department of Health, Navajo Area IHS, Health Command Operations Center, Chapters, all of our Navajo Nation employees, and all of our county, state, and federal partners for your dedication and hard work in the midst of this pandemic. We join our Navajo people in praying for strength, wisdom, protection, and good health. We thank them for supporting all of our Nation's leaders. Together, we face many difficult challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic and with creating a



brighter future for the Navajo Nation. With two years left in office, it is incumbent upon us as leaders to work together, to put differences aside, and address the issues that create barriers to progress and create real change.

Our ancestors passed down many good teachings, prayers, and values that have withstood the test of time and many adversities. Teachings such as T'áá hwó'ajít'éego, or self-reliance and self-determination, will help us along the way in everything that we strive to help and empower our people. We thank you for the opportunity to present the State of the Navajo Nation Address and we wish you a productive Spring Council Session. May God bless each of you and may God bless the Great Navajo Nation.